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Pető, Andrea

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Andrea Pető
Central European University, Budapest
petoand@t-online.hu

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The Archeology of History? Women's History and Gender History in Eastern Europe

In 1989, when "state feminism" collapsed in Eastern Europe, one third of employed women were ousted from the labor market in Hungary, and women's participation in decision-making processes declined and ranked among the lowest in Europe. Thus the institutionalization of women's history or gender history became (or should have become) a question of strategic importance, especially as it closely connects academia to active participation in democratic and political processes.

In a summarizing "state-of-the-art" volume on writing women's history published in 1991, East European women's history was presented as a big promise for the future.[1] This euphoric expectation was born after the collapse of communism and it expected theoretical and thematic innovation from the "East" presented as "terra incognita."[2] In this context, Eastern Europe refers to the former Soviet Bloc except Yugoslavia. Nearly ten years after a conference about writing women's history, very few illusions remain about "terra incognita" and about the ways how to make it "terra cognita." During the first women's history conference organized on Eastern Europe, in Minsk, Belarus, Karen Offen in her plenary speech summarized developments in women's history since 1991 and the steps to

1 An earlier version of this paper was published Andrea Pető, "Writing Women's History in Eastern Europe. Toward a 'Terra Cognita?'" in *Journal of Women's History* 16 (4) 2004: 173-183 See also Andrea Pető, Andrea, Judith Szapor, "The State of Women's and Gender History in Eastern Europe: The Case of Hungary" is forthcoming in *Journal of Women's History* 2006. 3.

2 Karen Offen, Ruth Pierson, and Jane Rendall, eds. *Writing Women's History: International Perspectives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

be taken in Eastern Europe.[3] In her talk (and later in her published paper), Offen highlighted present theoretical debates in writing women's history and outlined the tasks for the nearly sixty women's historians from twenty-four Eastern European countries: "both excavation and recuperation are required, and of course, theorizing as well, but theorizing on solid evidence. As in an archaeological dig, evidence must be located, excavated, sifted, and evaluated."[4] The results of the conference very much proved that recovering women's past the archaeological work is still in the early phases after ten years of democracy in Eastern Europe. But one question remains: should women's historians become archaeologists and go back in time to identify themes and issues in their own historiography?

Women's and gender historians are imprisoned by their institutional disciplinary framework, therefore are required to organize conferences with an interdisciplinary character, inviting contributions from such different disciplines as literature, sociology, history, and political science in different parts of Europe because gender history is not recognized as an independent field of study. Although conferences are interdisciplinary, they still perpetuate the borders of various disciplines. As a result, women's history is developing mainly through conferences and subsequent published volumes.[5] These volumes are contributing to the proc-

3 In September 1998, the inaugurating conference of Association of Teaching Gender Studies in Eastern Europe was organized by the Open Society Institute Women's Network Program in Belgrade, which was followed by the conference "Women's History and History of Gender in Countries in Transition" in Minsk. The conference papers were published in Elena Gapova, Al'mira Usmanova, and Andrea Peto, eds., *Gendernye istorii Vostochnoy Evropi* (Gendered Histories from Eastern Europe) (Minsk: European Humanities University, 2002). See in it, Karen Offen, "Ogljadibajas nazad-pazmislja o buduscsem: problemi zsenskoi i gendernoj uctorii pocla betrecsi v Belaggio (1989)," 13-27. These two conferences gave a picture of the present state-of-the-art feminist scholarship in history in Eastern Europe and also signaled possible directions and policies for the future.

4 Offen, "Ogljadibajas nazad-pazmislja o buduscsem," 23-24.

5 Kracimira Daskalova and Raina Gavrilova, eds., *Granicci na grazsdansztvoto: evropeiski zseni mezsdu tradicijata i modernocta* (Sofia: Bulgarszkaya Grupa za izledovania po ictoria na zsenite i pola, 2001). The volume was published to commemorate the 100th anniversary of foundation of Bulgarian Women's Union, but it also includes contributions from non-Bulgarian authors. This volume is a rare example of cooperation between NGOs and academics. See also M. Malisheva, ed., *Gendernii kaleidoskop: Kurs lekcii.* (Moscow: Akademia, 2001).This volume consist of introductory lectures on introducing gender analyses in the different disciplines, such as history; see in it, Pushkaraeva, "Gendernaja metologija v istorii," 52-76. See also Andrea Pető and Mark Pittaway, eds., *Women in History-Women's History, CEU History Department Working Paper Series,* no. 1. (Budapest: CEU, 1994), Andrea Pető and Bela Rasky, eds., *Construction and Reconstruction: Women, Family, and Politics in Central Europe, 1945-1998.* (Budapest: Central European University, 1999).

ess of accumulating knowledge and making women visible. Nearly each East European country has produced a first collection of conference papers on their own "national" women's history, but very few of these papers had actually been developed later into monographs, and even fewer of them are used in the classroom for teaching. It may be that our expectations were too optimistic in the early 1990s: we expected a boom in women's history, in a field crippled not only by institutional and disciplinary boundaries but also by national hegemonies and overarching positivist frameworks of history writing. A historiographical overview of writing women's history and history of gender in Eastern Europe in the past twelve years needs to pursue three goals. First, it should give a general overview of feminist theory on women and history, defining history, as Pierre Nora does, as a place of remembrance, analyzing who shall remember and what shall be remembered, that is, who shall control the past and our memory about the past.[6] Second, it should cover the development of the historiography focusing on women's roles in the past. Finally, it should analyze the thematic developments of the field. In this brief paper, I address only the second topic, and in doing so, I would like to share my personal reflection as an "East European" historian and educator who witnessed the developments of the past ten years. I was fortunate to be a part of this shift, focusing on issues related to writing women's history in Eastern Europe: professionalization and empowering educational experiments and the impact of the EU membership on institutionalization of teaching and research in gender history.

Professionalization

Writing history as a profession has preserved to this day the character of hierarchical craft workshops of the Middle Ages. Craft-man-ship(!) is taught at the university, through the rituals and steps of being accepted in the workshop. In my first postgraduate class on writing women's history in 1993 in Budapest, I had more male than female students. By the end of the 1990s, this trend reversed and I found myself in a position of teaching classes about gender history to women only. From the early 1990s, activist historians began to challenge the patriarchal character of writing history by not only setting up alternative institutions and establishing such forums as conferences, journals, and associations of female histo-

6 See Andrea Pető, "A nőtörténetírás története" (A History of Writing Women's History) *Rubicon* 6 (2001): 42-44. and Andrea Pető, "Társadalmi nemek és a nők története" (History of gender and women) in *Bevezetés a társadalomtörténetbe*. Eds. Bódy Zsombor, Ö. Kovács József, (Budapest, Osiris, 2003) 514-532.

rians, such as *Klio* in Croatia, but also aiming to transform the character of history writing. It would be impossible to list here the rich experiences and achievements of women's historians in the world, from the Berkshires conferences through the founding of professional journals, to the chairs and professorships at universities, all of which spotlight women's history. I have to underline here that in North America and Western Europe, this process happened with significant debates and political pressure from the women's movements. None of these political factors has been present in Eastern Europe. Instead of setting their agenda and to collaborate in norm transfer, the women's organizations are devoting most of their time to fundraising and responding to urgent social needs that are beyond their governments' reach.

During the process of the institution building of women's history, special sessions were organized at national historical congresses around the topic of "women" and these were added as a sub-theme to "history." A special characteristic of the Sovietized East European academic infrastucture is the existence of research institutes affiliated with the Academy of Sciences, which collected those academics whom the communist regime did not want to teach in a higher educational institution. In spite of the fact that this relatively flexible structure was there in 1989, "gender studies" developed outside of this framework, mostly in non-governmental organization (NGO) sphere. At the same time, sometimes independently from each other,[7] lectures and courses in women's history appeared at various women's studies centers. Feminist journals dedicated special issues to women's history, as it happened in Croatia,[8] or systematically published articles related to women's history.[9] Newly founded historical journals born in the euphoria of post 1989 period have been publishing special issues dedicated to women's history to share knowledge about this "new field."[10]

All these encouraging developments happened in the shadow of a major theoretical uncertainty: what kind of history are we writing? Despite this uncertainty, "academic feminism" itself an Eastern European phenomenon, characterized by a weak NGO sphere, non existent civil society and a few public intellectuals acting as norm entrepreneurs in the field of gender equality recovered women's history

7 In Belgrade in September 1998, two conferences were organized about women's history at the same weekend: one by the Women's Studies Center, one by Belgrade University and the Association of Social History.

8 *Kruhi i Ruze* (Bread and Roses) 15 (2001); and *Zene u Povijesti* (Women and History).

9 For example, see the journal *Feminizmas, Visuoemene, Kultúra: Straipsniu rinktine* , published in Vilnius.

10 For example, see the special issue, "Nők a történelemben-nőtörténelem" (Women in History-Women's History) *Rubicon* 6 (2001).

in the sense Offen suggested. Research on life stories of outstanding women and histories of feminist movements had started in the early 1990s, but the development of writing women's history confronted methodological and theoretical limitations. The main methodological problem was that most women's histories were framed in the positivist tradition of history writing. The theoretical problem was that research on "women" very much fit into the "statist feminist" intellectual tradition (to use Hana Havelkova's term to describe history writing during communism). The attempt to write women back into history is fundamentally no different from the essentialized notion of "women" during communism.[11]

Translation was an easy way to solve a much more complex problem and gender simply became "women." Historians very often write about gender but they are thinking of "women." Besides the consensual, common-sense, simplistic translation of gender to "women," scholars and academics are very unhappy with the simplistic use of gender. There is serious intellectual demand and a political imperative to relate the pre-1989 period both personally and institutionally to women's history writing. But to find the intellectual linkage to women's history requires the work of an archeologist: making women visible, starting with the most obvious problem of translating the term "gender." [12] For example, the translations of "sex" and "gender" to Hungarian are problematic since both terms are translated with the same word: *nem*, which means the negative particle ("non" or "no"). The first written document to introduce gender studies in the Hungarian higher education system in the mid-1990s, then, was submitted to the accrediting committee under the title as a proposal to accredit "a non-science" (*nem-tudomány*). Needless to say, it met with very limited success.

To set up an intellectual linkage is also important for translating decades of "Western scholarship" in an empowering way. The various projects to translate the basic texts about women and history in the past ten years have just started to bring intellectual dividends. Joan Scott's article, "Gender as Useful Category of Historical Analysis," was translated into Hungarian and Croatian in 2001 and in Russian in 2005.[13] Of course, some historians used the term, gender, and some

11 For more on the levels of gender politics of state socialism, see Miglena Nikolchina, "The Seminar: Mode d'emploi: Impure Spaces in the Light of Late Totalitarianism," *differences* 15, no. 1 (2002): 96-127.

12 See the special section of *The Making of European Women's Studies: A Work-in-Progress Report on Curriculum Development and Related Issues in Gender Education and Research*, vol. I- IV, ed. Rosi Braidotti, Esther Vonk, and Ilse Lazaroms about the translation problems of "sex" and "gender" in the different European languages.

13 Joan Scott, ed., *Feminism and History* (Budapest: Balassi Publishing House, 2001) in *Kruhi i Ruze* 15(2001): 54-60. and in *Zsenszkaja usztnaja isztorija. Gendernie iszledovanie*. Csaszty *I.* (Women's Oral History. Gender Studies Education. Part 1.) ed.

had read this text before its translation, but Scott's article had to be translated in order to become a massive influence to both historians and teachers of history in secondary education.

A consequence of these developments in defining women's history writing was that by the end of the 1990s, Croatian feminist historian Andrea Feldman labeled "women's gender history" a history research branch field.[14] Coining this new term was an attempt to solve one of the major debates in women's history writing "women" versus "gender" by constructing a subfield that retained the political agenda of the women's movement, but also acknowledged the political necessity of using gender as an analytical category.

Empowering Education: New Possibilities?

The paradoxes of the present are leading us to explore possible paths into the future: how do we integrate women's history into the secondary and post-secondary educational process? The past ten years did not result in institutional innovation as far as research on women's history and gender history were concerned: neither specific research institutes on women's history nor documentation centers with a distinctive profile were created.

The position of women's studies in the higher education system is very different in the various European countries. Gabriele Griffin categorizes these positions into four groups. The first group is made up of countries where women's studies, as a subject, is almost non-existent in higher education, e.g. Greece or Portugal. The second includes countries in which there are certain modules within undergraduate and graduate education, but mostly within the framework of traditional disciplines (Hungary falls into this category). The third is when feminist scholars, women's NGOs and "femocrats" have succeeded in establishing independent women's or gender studies departments and issuing degrees. This is characteristic of most Northern European countries. And finally, the fourth level is reached when women's and gender studies are "re-integrated" or mainstreamed, when traditional disciplines are reformed according to the expectations of gender studies. This is what has happened in Great Britain and Sweden.[15]

Andrea Peto. Open Society Institute, Network Women's Program, Biskek, Kirgiztan, 2004. pp 31-64.

14 Andrea Feldman, "Women's History-Gender History" in *Kruhi i Ruze* 15(2001): 2.

15 Griffin, Gabriele: "Gender Studies in Europe: Current Directions." In: Luisa Passerini, Dawn Lyon, Liana Borghi (eds.): *Gender Studies in Europe*. EUI, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, Florence, Italy, 2002: 19.

As recent European-wide comparative research proved, history as a discipline did not promote institutionalization of women's studies in Eastern Europe.[16] Although courses on a number of sub-themes of women's history are now offered as part of teaching programs for individual faculty members in the different higher educational institutions, these do not necessarily promote the interdisciplinary character of research on gender. This tendency very much fits Virginia Woolf's description of women's history only as an appendix to "real" history. The transformation of the language of history writing has a long way to go as far as gender equality is concerned. One can only hope that gender analyses might bring new research material for a theoretical re-conceptualization of history writing by enabling history to address issues of difference. The "other" stereotypes might be changed in educational processes so introducing gender-sensitivity in educational systems of the future has strategic importance.

Secondary-level history textbooks proved to be unchangeable when it came to including gender sensitivity. There were several attempts to write a comprehensive gender history of Eastern Europe for educational purposes. One of these attempts successfully produced a volume of additional teaching material (together with a teacher's manual), which was translated into nine languages of South-Eastern Europe and is now being used in teaching history on the secondary level of education.[17] The research and production was financed by the Stability Pact. Gender studies, then, became a "teachable" subject in Eastern Europe as a result of institutional lobbying by academics which raises the question how this will change the actual educational practices.[18]

Another attempt to introduce innovative ways of education was a women's oral history program of the Open Society Institute Network's Women's Program (NWP), which financed several workshops and training sessions to support inno-

16 "Employment and Women's Studies: The Impact of Women's Studies Training on Women's Employment in Europe," HPSE-CT-2001-0082. For more details see: www.hull.ac.uk/ewsi

17 Kristina Popova, Petar Vodenicharov, and Snezhana Dimitrova, eds., *Women and Men in the Past:Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. Additional Teaching Material for Secondary Schools.* (Blagoevgrad: South Western University, 2002).

18 See Katarina Kolozova, Jasna Baksisc-Muftic, and Michael Mittelauer, "Roles, Courses, Methodology: Gender in History Teaching" in *Gender Relations in South Eastern Europe: Historical Perspectives on Womanhood and Manhood in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,* ed. Slobodan Naumovic and Miroslav Jovanovic (Belgrade: Zur Kunde Suedosteuopas-Band II/33, 2002), 351-71. See also Andrea Peto and Berteke Waaldijk "Writing the Lives of Foremothers: History and the Future of a Feminist Teaching Tool," in *The Making of European Women's Studies.*

vative research and foster regional cooperation.[19] The need to support the region's women's and gender research to conduct women's oral history projects was raised during the conferences organized by NWP. Researchers, activists, and NWP coordinators have been demanding a comprehensive oral history project over the past four years, and the project created a team of researchers and consultants from within and outside the region.[20] After training workshops on methodology and theories of oral history and feminist theory, the project announced a grant competition and selected participants from nine countries received funding to implement their projects. [21] In summer schools during 2001 and 2002, successful applicants were provided with consultation and training and they developed electronic projects, which addressed pressing issues such as military conflicts or religious fundamentalism and were distributed widely as additional teaching materials for history teaching, videos, and books. I was lucky to be a part of this endeavor, which for me brought to fruition all of the hopes we had in the early 1990s: experts from within and outside Eastern Europe working together to construct an epistemological space to empower participants. The women who received grants to conduct research became dedicated fighters of the cause for gender equality in that sense they are making a "terra cognita" for all of us with our work.[22]

The Impact of the European Union Enlargement

The European Union's 2004 enlargement further divided the formerly socialist Eastern Europe, creating a two-tiered system between the new members and

19 Andrea Peto, ed., *To Look at Life through Women's Eyes: Women's Oral Histories from the Former Soviet Union,* (New York: Open Society Institute, 2002).

20 Consultants included Hande Birkalan (Turkey), Elena Mesherkina (Russia), Andrea Peto (Hungary), Marfua Tohtohodjaeva (Uzbekistan), and Marianne Kamp (United States).

21 The workshop was "Women's Memory: Oral Histories from Transition: Theory and Practice," held in Budapest (Hungary), Kishin'v, (Moldavia), and in Baku (Azerbaijan) in 2000, in Issa-kul (Kirgizstan) in 2001 and 2002, and in Jerevan (Armenia) and in Skopje (Macedonia) in 2002. See *Zsenszkaja usztnaja isztorija. Gendernie iszledovanie. Csaszty I.* (Women's Oral History. Gender Studies Education. Part 1.) ed. Andrea Peto. (Biskek: Open Society Institute, Network Women's Program, 2004) and

22 For the results see *Zsenszkaja Usznaja Isztorija (Women's Oral History), Csaszty 2.* ed. Svetlana Shakirova, (Bishkek, The Soros Foundation/ Kyrgiztan, OSI Network Women's Program, 2005.) and the introduction Andrea Pető, "Perehodnij period pamjaiti ili pamjaty o prehodom priode" (Memories of Transition or Memories about Transition) *ibid* 3-8.

those still waiting at the gates. Among the new members, the three Baltic States, perhaps because of their cultural ties to the Scandinavian countries, are in a class of their own in terms of women's leading role in politics and academia. While the EU membership's long-term effect on Hungarian academia and higher education remains to be seen, the EU draft constitution's marked agenda of gender equality and mainstreaming should be cause for cautious optimism.

As for official statistics indicating the ratio of women among history students and professors, skeptics would be ready to point out that it would not be the first time in Hungary that lofty principles of gender equality had been prescribed while the optimists could rightly point to the fact that, in accordance with EU regulations, we now at least have statistics. According to 2002/03 data of Hungary, there were 2374 male and 2059 female students in 4 and 5-year history programs, showing a slightly different picture from the traditional over-representation of female students in the arts in general; and the male/female ratio of Ph.D. students (174 males vs. 146 females) in the same year represents an increasing imbalance. Even fewer women will embark on a full-fledged academic career: among the 128 holders of the highest academic degree, doctor of the Academy, in history, only 19 are women and among the 27 members of the History and Philosophy Section of the Hungarian Academy of Arts and Sciences, only 3.

According to the text of the Lisbon strategy of the EU, a new framework of European education needs to help sustain economic growth and offer greater social cohesion as well as training for active citizenship. This education should also offer equal opportunity and, through mobility and exchange programs, a competitive education. And here we arrive at the problems of how to fit gender studies education into that logic. At first sight we think that is easy: scholarly works have proven in the past 20 years that gender studies indeed enhance equal opportunities and contribute to social cohesion.[23] On the other hand feminist academics working at different departments have a very hard time to smuggle in their existing courses the newly required training and educational structure.

In Hungary gender studies education developed mostly in higher educational institutions not in NGOs.[24] Dedicated scholars have offered courses with gender studies specialisation as a part of their teaching program. The few existing university level courses are undergraduate courses; there are no doctoral programs, nor degree programs in gender studies in Hungary. However, students enrolled in

23 See *Doing Women's Studies. Employment Opportunities, Personal Impacts and Social Consequences*. ed. Gabriele Griffin, (London-New York, Zed Books, 2005).

24 Andrea Pető, "The Process of Institutionalising Gender Studies in Hungary" in *The Making of European Women's Studies. A Work in Progress. Report on Curriculum Development and Related Issues*. Vol. I. eds. Rosi Bradiotti, Esther Vonk, (Utrecht University, 2000) 32-35.

other doctoral programs very often sign up for undergraduate courses in women's and gender studies. According to the accreditation documents [of Hungarian universities] gender studies as such will not be taught on the BA level. The bachelor level of education is expected to provide education without specific qualification. In the educational stream titled "knowledge of society" (introduction to social sciences) some courses are offered if dedicated faculty is already employed. Only elective courses will be offered in gender studies which are far from being satisfactory to change the structure and content of Hungarian higher education. The educational criteria for the MA level are to be determined in a year. However, taking into consideration the few resources and the junior position of academics currently teaching gender studies, it is difficult to imagine that any state financed university will be able to submit a teaching program consisting of 120 teaching credits in gender studies in the near future.

The development of gender studies depends on the individual lobbying of feminist academics within the higher educational institutions. Gender studies courses have been developed strictly on a disciplinary basis, since the institutional framework does not promote interdisciplinary models. And history was never a cradle of innovative and modern thinking. The Bologna process is expected to reinforce this disciplinary organizational framework. Moreover, for example as gender studies in Hungary are part of humanities, their prestige is expected to decline, alongside the other disciplines in the humanities. In Hungary there are no gender studies centres that would serve as umbrella organizations for interdisciplinary research, teaching, documentation and activism. Internationally, it was the co-operation of women NGOs, feminist academic networks and public institutions that has been able to achieve policy change.[25] One of the conclusions is that international pressure, such as the Bologna process, cannot help national actors in implementing change unless they are rooted in a variety of networks. There is no hope for a radical change while gender studies is lacking in not only institutionalisation, but also professionalization. These two processes will not happen without political pressure coming from the women's movement demanding socially informed education.

25 More on this: "Explorations. Feminist and Economic Inquiry in Central and Eastern Europe" Guest Editors: Marianne A. Ferber, Edith Kuiper, Contributors. Agnieszka Majcher, Krisztina Majoros, Andrea Pető, *Feminist Economics* 10 (3) November 2004, 81-118.

Conclusions

There is a general belief that women's history is something "new" that arrived in Eastern Europe from the "West" after 1989. That presents the period of Cold War as a "red blanket," which covered the society until 1989, when it was removed, revealing a society that had remained stagnant during decades of communism. Offen's plea for excavating the hitherto invisible past of women illustrates that approach. However, Joan Scott pointed out the danger of adapting the distinction between "East" and "West" in the feminist scholarship: "Next, this cartoon monolith of 'Eastern Europe' is credited with a feminism, which is itself impossibly unified, exactly as is that puppet of its counterpart, 'Western feminism.' Yet once these imaginary entities are traded as coinage often, dismayingly, in the name of some newly won grasp of 'cultural differences' superseding a supposedly imperialist feminist hegemony then they ensure stupefying effects of their own."[26] The unequal power relations need to be addressed in the future in order to benefit mutually from the internationalism of feminism.[27] The different feminist research projects, such as the women's oral history project or the history textbook project, were initiated in the region and were executed in an international cooperation based on equal relationship might give a hope for developing an international feminism which is not imprisoned in an "Eastern" versus "Western" framework.

The revision of history is a permanent process in which only groups change, and these are the groups who are revising memories and who are making attempts to rewrite history. If women's historians are still caught in the trap of believing that they must find the "truer" history, there will always be a group of historians who are ready to produce the "truest" history. If women's history as a field tries to revise history in the name of "women" to come up with a "truer" history, that enterprise failed from the beginning. So an archeological excavation is not an innocent activity after all because it is aiming to answer questions of representations but not of constructions.

26 Joan Scott, Introduction to the Hungarian translation of *Feminism and History*.

27 For theoretical problems of power relations in studying gender relations in Eastern Europe, see Katarina Kolozova, "Politico-methodological Aspects of Defining the Contextuality Specificity of South Eastern Europe," in *Gender Relations in South Eastern Europe*, 351-59.